

EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND ARTS COMMITTEE

Fourth Special Report

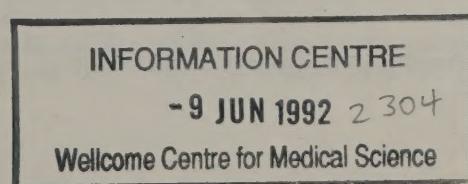
THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY SUB-COMMITTEE

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The Education, Science and Arts Committee is appointed under SO No 130 to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department of Education and Science, the Office of Arts and Libraries and associated public bodies, and similar matters within the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The Committee consists of a maximum of thirteen members, of whom the quorum is three.

The Committee has power—

- (a) to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place, and to report from time to time;
- (b) to appoint specialist advisers either to supply information which is not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the Committee's order of reference;
- (c) to communicate to any other such committee and to the Committee of Public Accounts its evidence and any other documents relating to matters of common interest; and
- (d) to meet concurrently with any other such committee for the purposes of deliberating, taking evidence, or considering draft reports.

The Committee has power to appoint a sub-committee in respect of matters relating to science and technology principally within the responsibilities of the Department of Education and Science or an associated public body, and to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before it. The sub-committee has power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to adjourn from place to place. It has a quorum of three.

Unless the House otherwise orders, all Members nominated to the Committee continue to be members of the Committee for the remainder of the Parliament.

The membership of the Committee since its nomination on 2 December 1987 is as follows:

Mr Malcolm Thornton (Chairman)

Hilary Armstrong
(added 8.3.88)
(discharged 18.1.89)

Mrs Maureen Hicks
(discharged 10.2.89)

Sir Michael McNair-Wilson

Mr Jacques Arnold
(added 10.2.89)

Mr Edward O'Hara
(added 12.12.91)

Mr Gerald Bowden
(added 27.11.89)
(discharged 18.3.91)

Sir Timothy Raison
(Chairman 15.12.87–8.11.89)
(discharged 27.11.89)

Mr David Evennett

Mr Gerry Steinberg

Mr Martin Flannery

Mr Jack Thompson
(discharged 8.3.88)

Mildred Gordon
(added 12.12.91)

Mr Patrick Thompson
(added 18.3.91)

Mr Harry Greenway

Mr Dennis Turner
(added 18.1.89)

Mr Win Griffiths
(discharged 7.12.90)

Sir Gerard Vaughan

Mrs Sylvia Heal
(added 7.12.90)
(discharged 12.12.91)

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FOURTH SPECIAL REPORT

THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY SUB-COMMITTEE

The Education, Science and Arts Committee has agreed to the following Special Report:

1. On 18 July 1991 Standing Order No. 130 (Select committees related to government departments) was amended to give the Education, Science and Arts Committee the power to appoint a sub-committee on science and technology. At the same time the maximum size of the Committee was increased from 11 members to 13. One of the two places thus created was filled on 12 December 1991.

2. We set up a Science and Technology Sub-Committee on 22 January 1992 and appointed Sir Gerard Vaughan as Chairman and Mr Edward O'Hara, Mr Gerry Steinberg, Mr Patrick Thompson and Mr Malcolm Thornton as members. Although insufficient time remained in the present Parliament for it to carry out any inquiry, we thought it would be helpful to our successors in the next Parliament if it were to give some thought to the Sub-Committee's method of operation.

3. The Sub-Committee has held two meetings, and has had an informal meeting with Lord Flowers, Chairman of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology.

4. The powers of the Science and Technology Sub-Committee differ in a number of respects from those of the Select Committee on Science and Technology which existed in the House of Commons until 1979.

5. First of all, it is not a committee in its own right but a sub-committee of the Education, Science and Arts Committee. We believe that its members will want to play a full part in the inquiries conducted by the main Committee as well as undertaking the work of the Sub-Committee. It would be appropriate for the Chairman of the main Committee to be a member *ex officio* of the Sub-Committee.

6. Furthermore, the Sub-Committee's remit is limited to "matters relating to science and technology principally within the responsibilities of the Department of Education and Science or an associated public body": it will not be able to deal with the wider range of scientific and technological issues which are the responsibility of Government departments other than the DES, and consequently the proper concern of other departmental select committees. The Sub-Committee's concerns will be the organisation and funding of civil science, and science and technology in schools and in further and higher education: these are important areas of policy in which the House of Commons should take a close and informed interest but they represent only a relatively small part of the picture. Few of the reports of the pre-1979 Commons Select Committee or the post-1980 Lords Select Committee have dealt with matters for which the DES is principally responsible.

7. Nonetheless, in view of the inter-departmental nature of many science and technology issues, it might well be the case that a topic falling within the Sub-Committee's remit—for example, priorities in medical research, or the funding of research into climatic change—was of interest to another departmental select committee. There are established procedures for ensuring that the work of different committees does not overlap, but it might in certain circumstances be advantageous for an inquiry of this kind to be carried out in co-operation with another committee. SO No.130 (4) (d) and (e) give departmental select committees the powers to communicate to one another their evidence and other documents, and to meet concurrently to deliberate or to take evidence; it would be helpful if those powers could also be given to the Science and Technology Sub-Committee. **We so recommend.**

8. We also attach importance to the development of a constructive relationship with the Select Committee in the House of Lords. The Lords Committee is very different from our Sub-Committee: it is considerably larger, it has a much wider remit ("to consider science and technology"), and its membership includes several Fellows of the Royal Society and members of the Fellowship of Engineering. The members of our Sub-Committee, on the other hand, will be elected politicians first and scientists second, and will quite rightly treat their inquiries as political (but not necessarily party political) activities. Despite these differences, we see considerable advantages in informal collaboration between the two bodies, so that on the one hand the Sub-Committee can draw on the Lords Committee's considerable scientific expertise and on the other the Lords Committee's valuable work could be made more widely known in this House.

9. There may also be some scope for formal collaboration between the two bodies. We referred in paragraph 7 above to the provisions enabling departmental select committees to communicate evidence and hold concurrent meetings. A number of select committees¹ have similar powers in relation to the equivalent committees of the House of Lords. The conferring of such powers on the Sub-Committee would, if the Lords made a similar provision, enable our Sub-Committee and the Lords Committee or one of its Sub-Committees to carry out an inquiry jointly. This course of action might be appropriate if both the Commons and the Lords were simultaneously interested in a subject which lent itself to investigation in a non-partisan spirit. We emphasise that these powers could only be exercised if both the Commons and the Lords Committee were agreed upon this course in each instance. **We recommend that the powers of the Sub-Committee be extended in this way.**

10. We believe that the Sub-Committee, with or without the additional powers we have recommended, can make a useful, if modest, contribution to the parliamentary consideration of science and technology. We hope that in the next Parliament Members with scientific interests or expertise will come forward to serve on the Education, Science and Arts Committee, and that the Committee will establish the Science and Technology Sub-Committee without delay.

11. We consider that the inquiry into information technology in schools, which we have been forced to defer, would be an eminently suitable topic for investigation by the Sub-Committee. A larger subject which it might wish to consider in due course is the standing of science and scientists in the community, touching on issues such as the "brain drain"—in a report earlier this Parliament we recommended that an objective study of the extent and causes of the "brain drain" be undertaken.² The Sub-Committee might also wish to spend some time each year considering the settlement of the science budget.

¹The new domestic committees have these powers by virtue of SO No. 125 (5), No. 125A (5) and No. 125B (4), and the Select Committee on European Legislation has powers to confer and to meet concurrently by virtue of SO No. 127 (11).

²First Report, Session 1990-91, *Science Policy and the European Dimension* (HC 127 (1990-91)), para 58.

